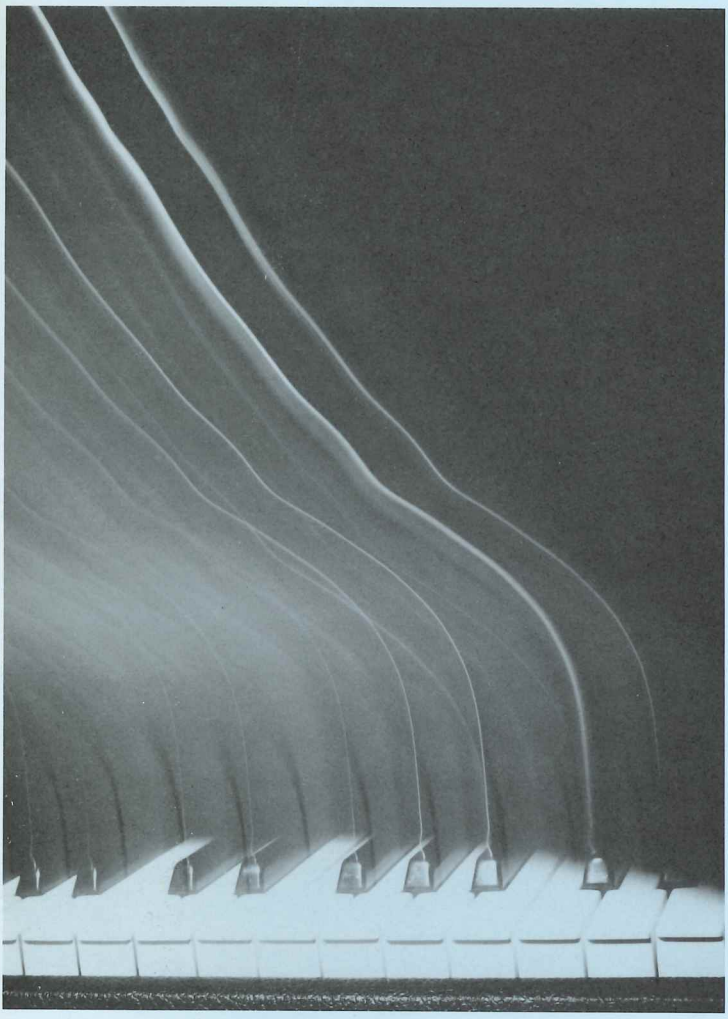

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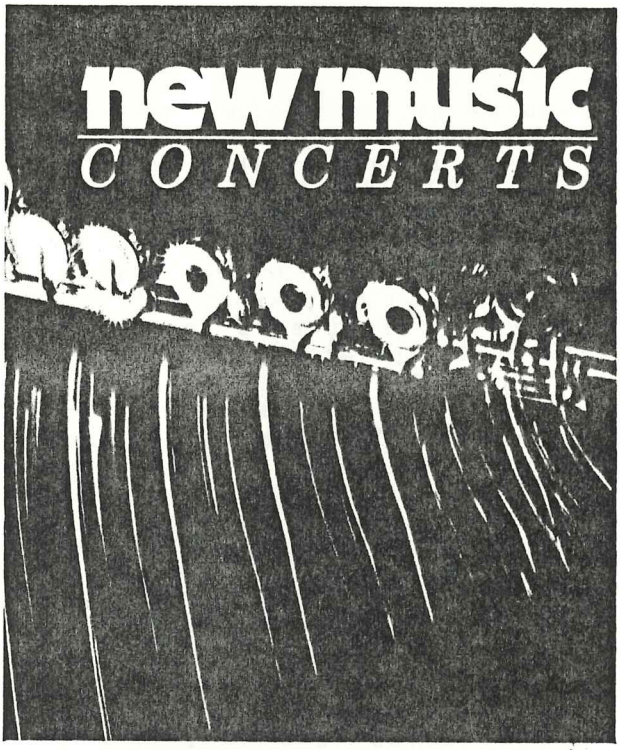

presents

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NOVEMBER 6, 1988 CONCERT: 7:30 PM

a tribute to the late U.S. composer

MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)

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ROBIN ENGELMAN, *percussion*
BARBARA PRITCHARD, *piano/celeste*

performing

FOR PHILLIP GUSTON (1986)
4 hour composition
for flute, percussion & piano/celeste

Lorne Grossman — Production Manager
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MORTON FELDMAN

Remarks by Morton Feldman before a performance of "For Philip Guston" as part of a 60th birthday celebration presented by the California Institute of the Arts in March 1986.

"Year ago...It's hard to believe that New York had only about two or three Szechuan restaurants--one of them, the most popular one, was called The Shanghai Cafe on 125th Street and Broadway. (To someone in the audience:) "You remember the Shanghai Cafe?" We used to take European musicians and painters there because the set up was there were tressels, the Broadway line goes up, and it looked like a Fritz Lang movie set. Anyway, there was this Chinese restaurant owner and he told me--especially because we were always waiting out in the street, the place was always crowded, and they only had a few tables--and he said that to have consecutively good food, the restaurant and the kitchen should be of equal size. And the only way I could interpret that was that for you to really understand this piece, I should talk about it for four hours (laughter from Morton Feldman and audience).

Well, "For Philip Guston" is a very special piece for me because many times I get titles after I write a piece. But with this I was thinking about Philip a lot. And thinking especially (this was written in '84) before that with a lot of my own students in Buffalo and the "post-modernism" and things like that which were always indicated by style, not by facility. And I was getting a little upset about that--the whole idea of just identifying things stylistically and not really thinking too much about what goes into it. And I was guilty of this with Philip. He was my closest friend and he was also my closest friend in art. I was in Europe for a year and he was at the Academy of Rome for a year, then I came back and he had a big show. I

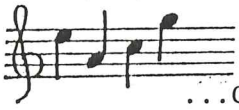
went down and I was just "confronted" with a completely new type of work. Before that I was always very supportive--almost to a fault. It was a big show and a glamorous gallery--the Marlborough Gallery--and the place was jammed. I was looking at a picture, he comes over and says, "What do you think?" And I said, "Well, let me just look at it for another minute." And with that, our friendship was over. We had no contact at all and then I got a call from his daughter...he died and had a heart attack and on his death bed, I mean to make matters worse, he wanted me to come and say Kaddish. So, it's a sad story. What makes it extremely sad is that we broke up because of style. I mean, to me abstract painting and abstract type of music--that was it. There wasn't anything else. In other words, I was the student in advanced middle age, who was just thinking stylistically. (laughs) You see? I think I made it up (to him), I wrote a marvelous article on him and the late work.

So what we're really doing, in a sense, is a kind of "a tale of two people", two types of artists that are telling their stories continually, either with notes or with images or with styles and fluctuating from one to another regardless of any other consideration. And this is <u>only</u> possible in a long work. I don't feel it could be done in a short work; by a short work I mean 45 minutes, 50 minutes. This way I can go places that in forty minutes you just can't do, or I feel I can't do, because, I mean, I'm still a composer--I haven't given up at least the title even though it's a little evasive. I was one of the people that made it evasive unfortunately. (Laughter by everyone) And to me a composer is dealing with, at certain times, a certain degree of that unfortunate term that the Schoenbergians use:

comprehensibility.

We start our trip in 1950 at the Museum of Modern Art. I'd just met John Cage, and he took me to a fabulous show. It was the first big show of the abstract expressionists that Dorothy Miller and Bob put on. It was an absolutely incredible evening, I was just new to the whole art scene and one of the few things I still remember--it was 1950. And I even remember where I was standing and I remember the first time saw a painting by Guston. He was the quintessence of what Kirkegaard would define as an artist. Someone who was always in one mood and then another. As opposed to the religious man that only has one mood. (Laughs) But at the same time these moods are very, very important. I was at the Museum of Modern Art a week ago and he has three beautiful paintings in which they essentially hid (though they didn't hide it--but it's like hiding it) in three different places in the museum...from three different periods...they couldn't put them in one room. There are some people who are allowed to change and there are some people who are not allowed to change. They are very happy to show, for example, early Jackson Pollock's "The She-Wolf" next to a 1950 abstraction or, maybe, 1953. With Guston, for some reason, everybody got angry when he changed. And there's a marvelous remark by Nietsche that really applies to Guston. Nietsche put it this way, "If you make me change, I'll make you pay for it." And Philip always had that problem, and he still does.

So we're back here in 1951 and I'm with Cage looking at this painting and he begins with (Feldman goes to the piano and plays twice):



...Cage. C.A.G.E.

One of the oldest devices (laughs) in

music. When I came across it I wondered "What's gonna happen with this C.A.G.E. things throughout the piece?" As far as my perrenial philosophy, as far as my point of view...(I wouldn't have said this if we'd had a large crowd here, it might sound somewhat pretentious...now it's just gonna sound confidential... (laughter).

Also back in New York, that moment, there was a big Mies van der Rohe show which I found quite exciting and I came across this remark by Mies van der Rohe which I agree with completely. It's really...I couldn't, no one could say it better. He said, "I don't want to be interesting, I want to be good." Now that's a very interesting point of view. Thank you.

(Aside) It's a short four hours. I now am paying the price. I have a Greek eternal punishment. I have to sit through these things (All erupt in laughter). And there are some--there is an hour and 10 minute piece which is A VERY LONG hour and 10 minute piece--but this?...this piece doesn't give you the feeling that it's four hours.

OK. Thanks." (Applause)

MORTON FELDMAN

Morton Feldman's musical education was as unconventionally and intuitively formed as his music came to be. At the age of 12, he started piano lessons with an aristocratic Russian who had known Scriabin and studied with Busoni. He began to write little Scriabinesque pieces and at the age of fifteen went to Wallingford Riegger for lessons in composition, which he recalled as being quite unsystematic. Three years later, feeling the need for a more professional teacher, he began to work with Stefan Wolpe, who did

not understand his non-developmental way of thinking. Then in 1950, Feldman met John Cage at Carnegie Hall after a concert at which Mitropoulos conducted the Webern Symphony. In Cage Feldman found someone who not only appreciated his music, but who introduced him to painters and sculptors whose work stimulated him profoundly.

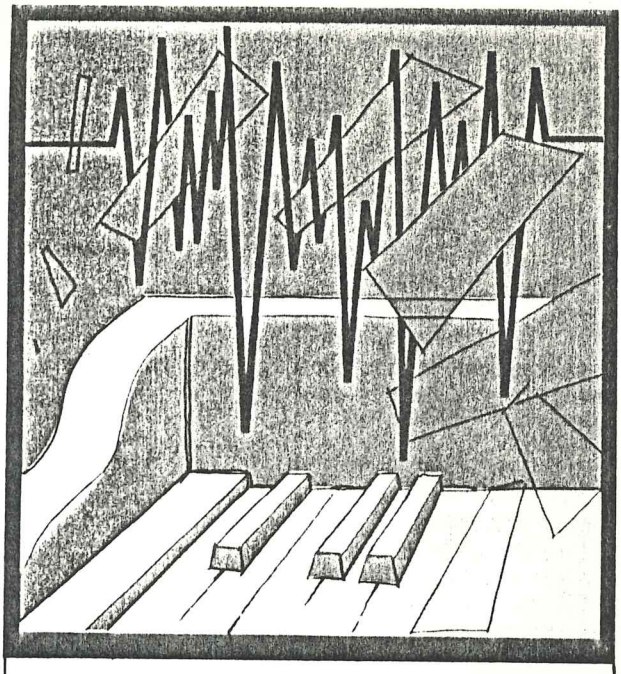
Like other path-breaking composers of this century, Morton Feldman saw as keenly as he heard and found himself in museums and art galleries as often as in concert halls. Contact with visual art, especially the painting of Philip Guston, helped him to break through the constraints that inhibited his auditory imagination. Liberation from received or newly constructed musical systems came from the immediate experience of the plasticity and color of sound. Feldman envisioned a sound world whose physicality and feeling tone would be just as directly and immediately present as in the paintings of the abstract expressionists. The pieces from that time already show the delicate coloration, sparse textures, intimate communication, and non-rhetorical forms that mark all his music.

Because fixed notation implied for him the frozen imagery of still photography, Feldman negotiated numerous liaisons between sight and sound. He was a kind of shadchen (Yiddish, ‘matchmaker’) arranging marriages between the page of music and the performer. He found that some contracts (graphic music) allowed too much freedom, and others too little, but eventually he discovered living-together-arrangements that achieved the delicate balance he sought between system and chance, imprecise prescription and unambiguous results. Feldman's notations are as personal as his feelings for the sounds they evoke.

The titles of Feldman's works reveal his concern for expressive ends rather than for structuralistic means: Extensions, Intersection, Projection, Durations. Other pieces are named for Feldman's characteristic concentration on the musical material and the sources of sound: Piano Pieces, Piano, Durations, Vertical Thought, Instruments, Voice and Instruments. And throughout his oeuvre we find the testaments of his warm relationships with fellow artists: for Franz Kline, Rothko Chapel, Frank O'Hara, John Cage, Philip Guston and Stefan Wolpe.

Feldman moved from New York to Buffalo in 1972 to take up a position at the State University of New York, where he held the Edgard Varese Chair of Composition. It was during the last eight years of his life that Feldman began writing compositions of extreme length. String Quartet (1979) is about 100 minutes long, and the Second String Quartet (premiered by the Kronos Quartet at New Music Concerts in 1984), if played strictly according to the score, would last six hours. The length of such compositions does more than give them a Guiness Book of Records claim to fame, it sets them outside the framework of consumer-oriented pieces that will fill one side of an LP, or even a CD, and that will take a suitably modest place in a concert program sandwiched among traditional repertoire. Such lengths subvert the premises of modern concert life and open the doors of the imagination to experiences one might have while watching an Anatolian villager tie thousands of knots to make one of the rugs Feldman loved so deeply, or while listening to a native bard recite thousands of verses of a mythic epic.

Austin Clarkson
York University



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A MORTON FELDMAN LEXICON

ABRASH

I use it (double sharp or double flat) because I think it's a very practical way of still having the focus of the pitch. And after all, what's a sharp? It's directional, right? And a double sharp is more directional. I got the idea from Teppich (q.v.). One of the most interesting things about a beautiful old rug in natural vegetable dyes is that it has 'abrash.' Abrash is that you dye in small quantitites, so it (the color) is the same, but yet it's not the same. It has a kind of microtonal hue. So when you look at it, it has that kind of marvelous shimmer, which is that slight gradation.

ABSTRACT EXPERIENCE

The Abstract Experience is a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating. It is a metaphor without an answer. The Abstract Experience cannot be represented. It is, then, not visible in the painting, yet it is there--felt.

ART

There is that doctor who opens you up, does exactly the right thing, closes you up--and you die. He failed to take the chance that might have saved you. Art is a crucial, dangerous operation we perform on ourselves. Unless we take a chance, we die in art. Everything is revealed in art. Everything is revealed by people that look at art.

ART & SOCIETY

I do feel that Kunst reflects society, that within a controlled society you cannot have a free Kunst.

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But yet Kunst is separate, the way chemistry is separate from other physical things, separate but related. When we are making Kunst, it's like you have no time to think of society.

AURAL PLANE

What I picked up from painting is what every art student knows, and it's called the picture plane. I substituted for my ears the aural plane, and it's a kind of balance, but it has nothing to do with foreground and background. It has to do with how do I keep from having the sound fall on the floor.

CAGE, JOHN (b. 1942)

John at that time lived on the top floor of a tenement on Grand Street overlooking the East River. Just a few potted plants, a long low marble table and a constellation of Lippold sculptures along the wall. It was in this room that I found an appreciation and an encouragement more extravagant than I had ever before encountered. It was here also that I met Philip Guston, my closest friend, who has contributed so much to my life in art. Quite frankly, I sometimes wonder how my music would have turned out if John had not given me those early permissions to have confidence in my instincts.

CHANGE/REITERATION

I prefer the word 'change' to 'variation' and 'reiteration' to 'repetition'. I'm involved with both. I don't make a synthesis, but they're going on at the same time. The change then becoming that which then becomes the reiteration, and the reiteration is changing. And it's not a calculated dialectic, because I have to watch what happens.

CONTROL/FREEDOM

The question continually on my mind all these years is to what degree does one give up control and still keep that last vestige where one can call the work one's own?

Stockhausen asked for my secret, and I said: "Sounds are very much like people. And if you push them, they push you back. So, if I have a secret, don't push sounds around." Stockhausen leans over to me and says: "Not even a little bit?"

DOUBLING

I got my feeling of doubling from my ears, but also from something that's very, very beautiful in that Teppich. If you want a very deep blue, you cannot get it on the first dye. It has to be redyed over and over again.

GUSTON, PHILIP (1913-1980)

In Guston the visible structure (the part of the structure that we see, really see) is arrived at very slowly, very precariously. Yet the way it is painted is Chassidic--exalted.

In the same sense that Kierkegaard said the religious 'dethrones' the aesthetical, one can say that the Abstract Experience in Guston's painting dethrones the visible masterpiece before us.

MEMORY

I felt that memory forms in music were primitive, based on a small attention, on convention. So what am I doing? I'm not doing anything different than Beethoven, who was writing a piece which is getting longer. And he does something else that nobody else ever did. He threw in another three tunes. I'm not throwing it in as a memory, I'm throwing it in a more Proustian sense.

And many times I would turn and say, "Didn't I do this over here?" And I would go over and look through it and then use it another way, of course. I can compare it to Remembrance of Things Past, where you begin idealistically and then you get more and more into reality as your experience grows.

MODULAR CONSTRUCTION

I don't work in a continuity, I work modularly. I have pieces where I don't repeat the tones retrograde, but I repeat the whole module retrograde. I'm not involved in linear information. Modular construction could be the basis for organic development, however, I use it to see that patterns are 'complete' in themselves and in no need of development, only of extension.

NOTATION

The degree to which a music's notation is responsible for much of the composition itself is one of history's best kept secrets.

NOTE

I can't hear a note unless I know its instrument. I can't hear a note to write it down unless I know immediately its register. I can't write a note unless I know its suggested shape in time.

PATTERNS

If my approach seems more didactic now--spending many hours working out strategies that only apply to a few moments of music--it is because the patterns that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult. If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose.

SILENCE

Silence is my substitute for counterpoint. It's nothing against something. The degrees of nothing against something. It's a real thing. It's a breathing thing.

SOUND

Sound was the hero, and it still is. I feel that I'm subservient. I feel that I listen to my sounds, and I do what they tell me, not what I tell them. Because I owe my life to these sounds. They gave me a life.

STASIS

One of the most beautiful things I've ever seen was a woman from Chicago, a contemporary Martha Graham. Sybil Shearer would come and stand on one leg and then move something like this, and then just stand, put her leg down and stand there. Nothing is happening. But because of what she does you are seeing the changes. In other words, when she stands still, you cannot believe she is standing still. Actually she is not standing still, because she is standing in an anticipating way, which you already are living out, the suggestions and the possibilities of some kind of kinetic movement.

Stasis, as it is utilized in painting, is not traditionally part of the apparatus of music. Music can achieve aspects of immobility, or the illusion of it: the Magritte-like world Satie evokes, or the floating sculpture of Varese. The degrees of stasis found in a Rothko or a Guston were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting.

SYSTEM

Boulez once said in an essay that he is not interested in how a piece sounds, only in how it is made. No

painter would talk that way. Philip Guston once told me that when he sees how a painting is made he becomes bored with it. The preoccupation with making something, with systems and construction, seems to be a characteristic of music today. It has become in many cases the actual subject of musical composition.

TEPPICH

A growing interest in Near and Middle Eastern rugs has made me question notions I previously held on what is symmetrical and what is not. In the Anatolian village and nomadic rugs there appears to be considerably less concern with the exact accuracy of the mirror image than in most other rug-producing areas. The detail of an Anatolian symmetrical image was never mechanical, as I had expected, but idiomatically drawn.

The moment a composer notates musical thought to an ongoing ictus, a grid of sorts is already in operation, as with a ruler. Music and the designs, or a repeated pattern, in a rug have much in common. Even if it be asymmetrical in its placement, the proportion of one component to another is hardly ever substantially out of scale in the context of the whole.

TIMBRE

"Know thy instrument!" Know thy instrument better than you know yourselves. Western music depends on good instruments, not toys, not improvisational instruments.

TIME

The degeneration of the rugs happened when people started to value their time. I am very interested in the rugs in the sense of being involved with the amount of work and solitary time involved.

TRANSLATION

Samuel Beckett wrote something for me in 1977. I'm reading it. There's something peculiar. I can't catch it. Finally I see that every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening. What you're doing in an almost Proustian way is getting deeper and deeper saturated into the thought. What I do then is I translate something into a pitchy situation. And then I do it where it's more intervallic, and I take the suggestions of that back into another kind of pitchyness--not the original pitchyness. Always retranslating and then saying, now let's do it with another kind of focus.

VARESE, EDGARD (1883-1965)

I did one lesson on the street with Varese, it lasted half a minute. It made me an ochestrator. He said, "What are you writing now, Morton?" I told him. He says, "Make sure you think about the time it speaks from the stage to out there. Let me know when you get a performance, I'd like to hear it." And he walked away. From then on I started to listen.

What would my life have been without Varese? For in my most secret and devious self I am an imitator. It is not his music, his 'style' that I imitate; it is his stance, his way of living in the world. His musical shapes respond to each other rather than 'relating' in any sense that the word is used today. This is what gives his music that almost stationary grandeur, like a sun standing still at the command of a latter-day Joshua.

WOLPE, STEFAN (1902-1972)

Loved the conversation, loved the questions and the answers, and the

questions and the answers, and the questions and trying to find the answers. It was the fragmentary element in my music, the fact that it wasn't organic, it didn't work from seeds with that strong variational approach, which was part of his generation. I think that was one thing he didn't understand--why or how my music was so fragmentary, that stop-and-go and stop-and-go.

****

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